المجلس الاسلامي
Islamic Council

TEXT OF THE STATEMENT OF MR. SALEM AZZAM, SECRETARY GENERAL, ISLAMIC COUNCIL, MADE AT A PRESS CONFERENCE HELD AT 1100 HOURS ON THURSDAY, JUNE 18, 1987 IN THE LONDON PRESS CENTRE ON THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN EGYPT AND TUNISIA.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamu Alaikum,

Welcome and thank you for coming.

In recent years the political situation in Tunisia and Egypt has been marked by increasing persecution of the opposition and violation of human rights.

The situation in Tunisia is appalling. Eversince Tunisia gained independence in 1956, the Tunisian people have suffered under the dictatorial rule of Habib Bourguiba, proclaimed president for life. Throughout his 30-year long despotic rule, he has violated human rights blatantly. He does not tolerate any dissent or criticism and deals with any opposition ruthlessly. He does not hesitate to injure even the religious feelings of the Tunisian people.

In July 1981, he cracked down on the Islamic

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Tendency Movement and arrested 106 of its leading members, including its Chairman, Professor Rashed Al Ghannoushi, and Secretary General, Abdelfettah Moro. In jail they were savagely tortured and later tried and punished on trumped up charges in a show trial. Professor Ghannoushi was sentenced to 20 years in prison and Abdelfettah Moro to 11 years.

The convicted members of the Islamic Tendency Movement were released before completing their terms of imprisonment due to policy revision dictated by political considerations. Last March the regime once again cracked down on the Islamic Tendency Movement and made large-scale arrests, including Professor Ghannoushi. It is believed that this time Bourguiba is determined to sentence the leaders to capital punishment and others to long-term imprisonment.

Last March the regime also cracked down on the Islamic activists among the University students. Once again it arrested a large number of students, tortured them and is holding them incommunicado in prisons. The regime did not spare even the girl students. Scores of them were reported arrested, beaten, stripped naked, indecently assaulted and detained incommunicado. According to Tunisian law there is no maximum limit to incommunicado detention and the regime has always made full use of this.

The worst aspect of the arrests is that the detainees have no right of access to their families or to their lawyers. In fact, the authorities do not even confirm or deny the arrests, causing great distress and anxiety to the families.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Egypt, the situation has become much worse since last April's general elections. The election campaign was marred by the arrest, torture and imprisonment of thousands of people belonging to the opposition. This not only filled to capacity the existing prisons in the country but also led to serious overcrowding. To relieve pressure on the existing prisons and to create additional capacity, the regime is reported to have decided to reopen the notorious TOR prison in the Sinai. Before it was shut down, the Tor prison was reserved for the worst criminals. With a capacity for 9000, it will now be used to detain political prisoners. Being far away and isolated, it will prevent the leakage of information about maltreatment and torture of political prisoners. The reopening of this prison also lends support to fears that the regime intends to round up and imprison yet more people in order to suppress all opposition to its despotic rule. A unique feature of the regime's prison system is its "Istiqbal" prison which translates as "reception" in English. Before sending them to other prisons, political prisoners are brought to this prison to be "welcomed" by beating and torture.

A matter of grave concern is the frequent use of physical and mental torture of political prisoners by the Mubarak regime. The commonly used methods include burning by cigarettes, electric shocks on sensitive body parts, suspending by the arm, attacks by ferocious dogs and indignities of every kind.

One of the chief culprits responsible for implementing the tyrannical policies and decisions of the regime was Hassan Abu Basha, former Minister of Interior in the Mubarak government. Before he was promoted to the ministerial rank, he was head of Mubahas Amn al Dawla, the State Security Intelligence. It was in that position that he earned notoriety for his brutality in dealing with the opposition. It is not surprising that he came to be despised by Egyptian people, especially by the relations and friends of the victims of his terror organisation. Last May, he was shot and wounded . The regime is using the incident for another crackdown on the opposition groups.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is strange that being itself guilty of terrorism against the people, the Mubarak regime complains of opposition-violence. The truth is that

what the regime calls opposition-violence is nothing but angry reaction of the people to state terrorism. In this connection, most analysts of the Egyptian political scene believe that the attempt on the life of Hassan Abu Basha was the revenge of someone whose relation or relations had been tortured or killed at his orders.

The regime will stop at nothing in order to create an excuse to crack down on the opposition. In this connection, it has been trying to create mischief between Muslims and Copts whereas the fact is that the two communities have lived together for centuries in peace and amity.

Then there is the question of the judiciary. Unbelieveably, verdicts passed by the courts on constitutional and other matters are ignored and violated by the Mubarak regime, whenever it finds them disagreeable. This sets a dangerous example and encourages the people to take the law into their own hands, besides undermining the authority of the judiciary. The situation is made worse by emergency laws and special courts which the regime uses to crush the opposition.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What is needed in Egypt today is respect for human rights; especially freedom of expression, freedom of press, freedom of dissent, freedom of association. However, the freedom should be genuine and for all.

The Mubarak regime is deceiving the world and the Egyptian people by citing the parliament, the official opposition and newspapers as proof of democracy. All that Mubarak has done is to cede a few seats in the parliament to the opposition and take an overwhelming majority of seats for his own party by massive rigging of elections. He has thus ensured that he can do what he likes and impose his policies against the will of the people. He is really a military dictator in civilian clothes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our aim is to secure respect for human rights, freedom of expression and association, and an end to arbitrary arrests and torture, an end to emergency laws and special courts, and end to rigging of elections, and respect for people's aspirations. This is what Islam stands for. Our struggle for establishing an Islamic order means at the same time a struggle for the protection of human life, protection of fundamental rights and the fulfilment of our needs and hopes.

I have now the pleasure to introduce to you our honoured guests and brothers from Egypt and Tunisia and between us we shall be happy to answer your questions.